

# ROMMEL

## BATTLES FOR TOBRUK

### Historical and Players' Notes

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## Orders of Battle

The following orders of battle list the forces available to each side in each of the four scenarios. Axis formations are identified by nationality: *It* for Italian and *Ger* for German.

Note that in some cases units of one division are split between two headquarters. For example, in Brevity, parts of 5th Light Division appear in Gruppe Herff and DAK.

Unit types on the orders of battle correspond to the unit types assigned to the units in the game. In some cases, this differs from their official designations. For example, German machinegun battalions were used as motorized infantry in Africa and thus are identified as motorized in the game and in the orders of battle.

British unit designations are a bit confusing. Regiments are administrative units, not field units. A regiment could have any number of battalions, all fighting in different armies; the Royal Tank Regiment (RTR), for example, had 24 (numbered 1-12 and 40-51). Battalions were referred to by a battalion number and the regimental name, for example 42nd RTR: the 42nd Battalion of the Royal Tank Regiment. To further confuse things, some regiments had strange names; the King's Royal Rifle Corps was a regiment, and so was the Rifle Brigade (making the 2nd Rifle Brigade a battalion). Finally, some regiments (the older ones) had numbers and some battalions (mostly former cavalry) were regiments too; the 7th Hussars were not the 7th battalion of any regiment, but a complete regiment with one battalion.

### BREVITY

#### Axis

##### *Gruppe Herff*

##### *Trento Infantry Division (It)*

61 Infantry Regiment

1st, 2nd Battalions

62 Infantry Regiment

1st, 2nd, 3rd Battalions

##### *Ariete Armored Division (It)*

8th Bersaglieri Regiment

3rd Battalion

##### *5th Light Division (Ger)*

3rd Reconnaissance Battalion

5th Panzer Regiment

II Battalion

##### *15th Panzer Division (Ger)*

33rd Reconnaissance Battalion

15th Motorized Battalion

##### *Deutsches Afrika Korps*

4th, 5th, 11th Tank Battalions (It)

##### *Trento Infantry Division (It)*

7th Bersaglieri Regiment

10th, 11th Battalions

##### *Ariete Armored Division (It)*

32nd Armored Regiment

1st, 2nd, 7th Battalions

8th Bersaglieri Regiment

5th, 12th Battalions

##### *Brescia Infantry Division (It)*

19th Infantry Regiment

1st, 2nd Battalions

20th Infantry Regiment

1st, 2nd, 3rd Battalions

##### *5th Light Division (Ger)*

200th Motorized Regiment

2nd, 8th Battalions

##### *15th Panzer Division (Ger)*

8th Panzer Regiment

I Battalion

104th Motorized Regiment

I, II Battalions

115th Motorized Regiment

I Battalion

#### Allies

##### *7th Armoured Division*

Beamcol, Nirecol,

Rozecol Motorized Columns

2nd Rifle Brigade

7th Armoured Brigade

2nd RTR

22nd Guards Infantry Brigade

4th RTR, 2nd Scots Guards,

3rd Coldstream Guards,

1st Durham Light Infantry

### *Tobruk Garrison*

18th Indian Cavalry  
3rd Armoured Brigade  
King Dragoon's Guards,  
3rd Hussars, 1st RTR,  
D Squadron 7th RTR

### *9th Australian Infantry Division*

18th Australian Infantry Brigade  
9th, 10th, 12th Battalions  
20th Australian Infantry Brigade  
13th, 15th, 17th Battalions  
24th Australian Infantry Brigade  
28th 32nd, 43rd Battalions  
26th Australian Infantry Brigade  
23rd, 48th, 1st Pioneer Battalions

### *Deutsches Afrika Korps*

*5th Light Division (Ger)*  
3rd Reconnaissance Battalion  
5th Panzer Regiment  
I, II Battalions

200th Motorized Regiment  
2nd, 8th Battalions

### *15th Panzer Division (Ger)*

33rd Reconnaissance Battalion  
15th Motorized Battalion  
8th Panzer Regiment  
I, II Battalions  
104th Motorized Regiment  
I, II Battalions  
115th Motorized Regiment  
I, II Battalions

## **BATTLEAXE**

### **Axis**

#### *Panzergruppe Afrika*

I/18 Flak Battalion (Ger)  
300th Infantry Battalion (Ger)

#### *21st Corps*

##### *Pavia Infantry Division (It)*

27th Infantry Regiment  
1st, 2nd, 3rd Battalions  
29th Infantry Regiment  
1st, 2nd, 3rd Battalions

##### *Brescia Infantry Division (It)*

19th Infantry Regiment  
1st, 2nd Battalions  
20th Infantry Regiment  
1st, 2nd, 3rd Battalions

#### *22nd Corps*

##### *Ariete Armored Division (It)*

32nd Armored Regiment  
1st, 2nd, 7th Battalions  
8th Bersaglieri Regiment  
3rd, 5th, 12th Battalions

##### *Trento Infantry Division (It)*

7th Bersaglieri Regiment  
10th, 11th, Battalions  
61st Infantry Regiment  
1st, 2nd Battalions  
62nd Infantry Regiment  
1st, 2nd, 3rd Battalions

### **Allies**

#### *Western Desert Force*

#### *4th Indian Infantry Division*

Central Indian Horse  
4th Armoured Brigade  
4th RTR, 7th RTR  
11th Indian Infantry Brigade  
2nd Cameron Highlanders,  
5th Madras Light Infantry,  
6th Rajputana Rifles  
22nd Guards Infantry Brigade  
1st Buffs, 2nd Scots Guards,  
3rd Coldstream Guards

#### *7th Armoured Division*

7th Armoured Brigade  
2nd RTR, 6th RTR  
7th Support Group  
1st King's Royal Rifle Corps,  
2nd Rifle Brigade

#### *Tobruk Garrison*

18th Indian Cavalry  
3rd Armoured Brigade  
King's Dragoon Guards,  
D Squadron 7th RTR, 1st RTR,  
3rd Hussars

#### *9th Australian Infantry Division*

1st Pioneer Battalion  
18th Australian Infantry Brigade  
13th, 32nd Battalions

20th Australian Infantry Brigade  
 9th, 10th, 15th Battalions  
 24th Australian Infantry Brigade  
 17th 28th, 43rd Battalions  
 26th Australian Infantry Brigade  
 12th, 23rd, 48th Battalions

## CRUSADER

### Axis

#### *Panzerarmee Afrika*

I/18, I/33 Flak Battalions (Ger)

#### *Afrika Division (Ger)*

300th, III/255,

III/347 Infantry Battalions

155th Infantry Regiment

361st Infantry Regiment

#### *Savona Infantry Division (It)*

15th Infantry Regiment

16th Infantry Regiment

#### *Bardia Garrison (It)*

Genova Machinegun Battalion

280th Infantry Regiment

#### *20th Corps*

##### *Ariete Armored Division (It)*

132nd Armored Regiment

7th, 8th, 9th Battalions

32nd Armored Regiment

1st, 2nd Battalions

8th Bersaglieri Regiment

##### *Trieste Motorized Division (It)*

9th Bersaglieri Regiment

65th Motorized Regiment

66th Motorized Regiment

##### *RECAM (It)*

4th, 5th, 11th Tank Battalions

Gessi Reconnaissance Battalion

#### *21st Corps*

##### *Trento Infantry Division (It)*

61st Infantry Regiment

62nd Infantry Regiment

7th Bersaglieri Regiment

##### *Pavia Infantry Division (It)*

27th Infantry Regiment

28th Infantry Regiment

##### *Brescia Infantry Division (It)*

19th Infantry Regiment

20th Infantry Regiment

#### *Bologna Infantry Division (It)*

39th Infantry Regiment

40th Infantry Regiment

#### *Deutsches Afrika Korps*

##### *15th Panzer Division (Ger)*

33rd Reconnaissance Battalion

8th Panzer Regiment

I, II Battalions

115th Motorized Regiment

I, II Battalions

200th Motorized Regiment

2nd, 15th Battalions

##### *21st Panzer Division (Ger)*

3rd Reconnaissance Battalion

5th Panzer Regiment

I, II Battalion

104th Motorized Regiment

I, II, 8th Battalions

### Allies

#### *8th Army*

#### *13th Corps*

1st Tank Brigade

8th RTR, C Squadron 42nd RTR,

44th RTR

##### *2nd New Zealand Infantry Division*

2nd New Zealand

Divisional Cavalry

28th Maori Battalion

4th New Zealand Infantry Brigade

5th New Zealand Infantry Brigade

6th New Zealand Infantry Brigade

##### *4th Indian Infantry Division*

Central Indian Horse

5th Indian Infantry Brigade

7th Indian Infantry Brigade

11th Indian Infantry Brigade

##### *2nd South African Infantry Division*

3rd South African Infantry Brigade

4th South African Infantry Brigade

6th South African Infantry Brigade

#### *30th Corps*

4th Armoured Brigade

3rd RTR, 5th RTR, 8th Hussars,

2nd Scots Guards

##### *1st South African Infantry Division*

3rd South African Armoured Cars

1st South African Infantry Brigade  
 5th South African Infantry Brigade  
*7th Armoured Division*  
 4th South African Armoured Cars,  
 11th Hussars,  
 King's Dragoon Guards  
 7th Support Group  
 7th Armoured Brigade  
 2nd RTR, 6th RTR, 7th Hussars  
 22nd Armoured Brigade  
 2nd Hussars,  
 3rd County of London Yeomanry,  
 4th County of London Yeomanry

*Tobruk Garrison*

Carpathian Uhlans  
 2nd Czech Battalion  
 Carpathian Brigade  
 32nd Tank Brigade  
 1st RTR, 4th RTR,  
 D Squadron 7th RTR  
*70th Infantry Division*  
 3rd, 15th Australian  
 Infantry Battalions  
 14th Infantry Brigade  
 16th Infantry Brigade  
 23rd Infantry Brigade

**GAZALA**

**Axis**

*Panzerarmee Afrika*

I/18, I/33, I/43 Flak Battalions (Ger)  
*90th Light Africa Division (Ger)*  
 Sondervverband 288  
 155th Motorized Regiment  
 I, II Battalions

*Gruppe Cruwell*

*Sabratha Infantry Division (It)*  
 85th Infantry Regiment  
 86th Infantry Regiment  
*Trento Infantry Division (It)*  
 61st Infantry Regiment  
 62nd Infantry Regiment  
*Pavia Infantry Division (It)*  
 27th Infantry Regiment  
 28th Infantry Regiment  
*Brescia Infantry Division (It)*  
 19th Infantry Regiment

20th Infantry Regiment  
*90th Light Africa Division (Ger)*  
 200th Motorized Regiment  
 I, II Battalions  
 361st Motorized Regiment  
 I, II Battalions

*20th Corps*

*Trieste Motorized Division (It)*  
 8th Bersaglieri Battalion  
 11th Tank Battalion  
 9th Bersaglieri Regiment  
 65th Motorized Regiment  
 66th Motorized Regiment  
*Ariete Armored Division (It)*  
 Nizza Reconnaissance Battalion  
 132nd Armored Regiment  
 8th, 9th, 10th Battalions  
 8th Bersaglieri Regiment  
*Littorio Armored Division (It)*  
 Lancieri di Novara Tank Battalion  
 133rd Armored Regiment  
 12th, 51st Battalions  
 12th Bersaglieri Regiment

*Deutsches Afrika Korps*

*15th Panzer Division (Ger)*  
 33rd Reconnaissance Battalion  
 8th Panzer Regiment  
 I, II Battalions  
 115th Motorized Regiment  
 I, II, III Battalions  
*21st Panzer Division (Ger)*  
 3rd Reconnaissance Battalion  
 5th Panzer Regiment  
 I, II Battalions  
 104th Motorized Regiment  
 I, II, III Battalions

**Allied**

*8th Army*

1st Duke of Cornwall's  
 Light Infantry,  
 1st Sherwood Foresters  
*5th Indian Infantry Division*  
 9th Indian Infantry Brigade  
 10th Indian Infantry Brigade  
 29th Indian Infantry Brigade  
*10th Indian Infantry Division*  
 11th Indian Infantry Brigade

## 20th Indian Infantry Brigade

### *13th Corps*

#### 1st Tank Brigade

8th RTR, 42nd RTR, 44th RTR

#### 32nd Tank Brigade

4th RTR, 7th RTR

#### *50th Infantry Division*

##### 69th Infantry Brigade

##### 150th Infantry Brigade

##### 151st Infantry Brigade

#### *1st South African Infantry Division*

##### 3rd South African Armoured Cars

##### 1st South African Infantry Brigade

##### 2nd South African Infantry Brigade

##### 3rd South African Infantry Brigade

### *30th Corps*

#### 1st Free French Brigade

#### *1st Armoured Division*

##### 12th Lancers, Royals

##### 201st Guards Motor Brigade

##### 2nd Armoured Brigade

Queen's Buffs, 9th Lancers,

10th Hussars, 1st Rifle Brigade

##### 22nd Armoured Brigade

2nd Hussars,

3rd County of London Yeomanry,

4th County of London Yeomanry,

3rd Sharpshooters

#### *7th Armoured Division*

King's Dragoon Guards,

6th South African Armoured Cars

##### 4th Armoured Brigade

8th Hussars, 3rd RTR, 5th RTR,

1st King's Royal Rifle Corps

##### 7th Motor Brigade

##### 3rd Indian Motor Brigade

### *Tobruk*

#### *2nd South African Infantry Division*

##### 4th South African Infantry Brigade

##### 6th South African Infantry Brigade

## Historical Notes

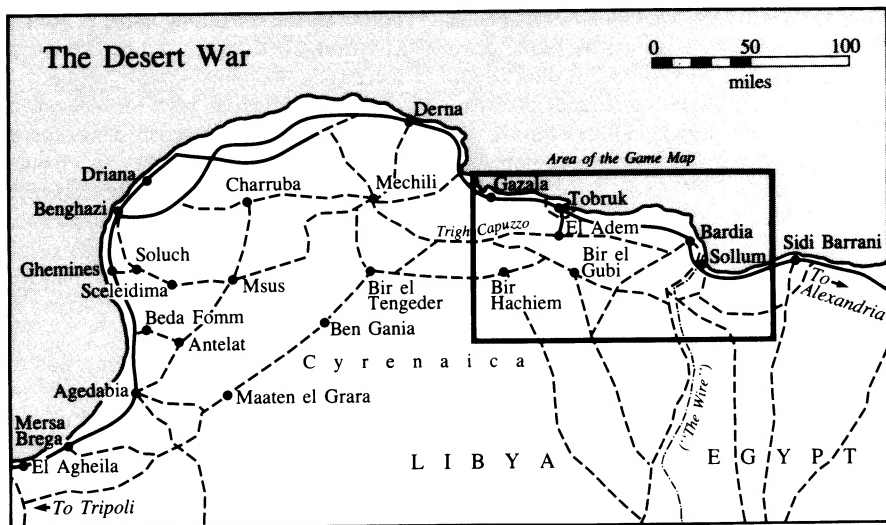
### PRELUDE: ROMMEL ARRIVES

In the winter of 1940-41, the British Western Desert Force had gained near total supremacy over the desert. In December

the 7th Armoured and 4th Indian Divisions had attacked and overwhelmed the Italian forces guarding the Libyan-Egyptian frontier, destroying four Italian divisions. In late December the 4th Indian Division had been withdrawn for employment in East Africa and 6th Australian Division had taken its place. The division's first action had been to storm Bardia fortress, capturing both the harbor and the remnants of four more Italian divisions. In January Tobruk fell and in the first days of February the 7th Armoured Division cut off and destroyed the remnants of the retreating Italian 10th Army at Beda Fomm. In less than two months a Commonwealth force never exceeding two divisions had totally annihilated an Italian army over five times its strength.

Unfortunately, the Commonwealth force was almost completely spent in the process. 7th Armoured Division, which began the offensive with over 200 tanks, finished its work at Beda Fomm with scarcely 50. In addition, political and strategic considerations seemed to require that the British send a force to assist the Greeks in their war against Italy. Thus, although the British had received several new divisions, the best troops would be sent to Greece and Western Desert Force would go on the defensive for the time being.

While the veteran 6th Australian Division was withdrawn for Greece, its place was taken by the as-yet-untried 9th Australian Division. 7th Armoured Division was withdrawn to Egypt for badly-needed refitting, while 2nd Armoured Division took its place. However, two of 2nd Armoured's six tank battalions had been shipped early and had fought (as part of 7th Armoured) throughout the winter offensive, and were thus exhausted. The division's 1st Armoured Brigade, with three more tank battalions and most of both divisions' remaining operational tanks, was sent to Greece. The only tanks left to the inexperienced tankers of 2nd Armoured's other brigade, the 3rd, were the surviving worn-out vehicles of 7th Armoured, supplemented by a number of captured Italian M-13/40's. In



an attempt to remedy the weakness in mobile troops on the frontier, the British reinforced 2nd Armoured with the 3rd Indian Motor Brigade. The brigade was made up of good personnel but had no antitank guns, a crippling liability in the desert.

While this changing of the guard was being accomplished, General Rommel had arrived in Tripoli with the first contingent of German ground troops. While he was designated as a corps commander, at first he possessed only one understrength armored formation, the 5th Light Division. This division had as many tanks as a standard panzer division, but much less artillery and infantry.

In addition to the one German division, there were several Italian formations in Tripolitania available for use. These were not technically under Rommel's command, and the Italian high command was understandably reluctant to risk their destruction considering the catastrophe of a month earlier. Nevertheless, some of the more battle-worthy elements of these divisions could be used in a short offensive against the British.

First, there were the four remaining Italian infantry divisions in Africa: Savona, Bologna, Brescia, and Pavia, which had remained near Tripoli to guard against a

French invasion from Tunisia. Now that it was clear that the Vichy troops in Tunisia would remain neutral, these divisions could safely be committed against the British.

Next, there were the newly arrived elements of the Italian Armored Corps, the Trento Motorized Division and the Ariete Armored Division. Ariete's medium tanks had been sent over ahead of the main body, however, and had been wiped out at Beda Fomm. The division's remaining armored force (32nd Tank Regiment) was equipped almost entirely with L3 tankettes—slow, thinly armored, and armed only with two machineguns.

Despite the apparent weakness of his forces, Rommel sensed even greater weakness on the British side and decided to attack. The attacking force would consist of 5th Light and Ariete moving cross-country, while Brescia would provide a follow-up force for operations on the coast road. The effort would be supplied by the expedient of turning the Trento into an infantry division and using its trucks as supply carriers.

The offensive jumped off on March 31st and ran into some initial difficulties at the Mersa Brega bottleneck. However, the British commander chose to await further developments before committing his armor

and by April 1 the vital narrows had been cleared. With German armor in the open desert, the 2nd Armoured Division began giving ground and losing tanks at an alarming rate from mechanical breakdown. By April 5th, Brescia had recaptured Benghazi and pressed on to Driana. 5th Light's 3rd Recon Battalion had led the way to Benghazi and then struck due east to Charuba. 5th Panzer Regiment was at Antelat and 2nd Machinegun Battalion was at Sceleidima, both closing in on Msus. In the south the 8th Machinegun Battalion and the main body of Ariete made the most impressive gains, having reached Bir Tengerder by way of Maaten el Grara and Ben Gania. By the end of the first week of April Mechili was surrounded, Derna had fallen, and advanced German detachments were approaching Tobruk.

On the British side, the situation looked grim. The forward troops of 9th Australian Division had successfully disengaged from Benghazi and delayed the Brescia Division with rearguard detachments and demolitions. However, 3rd Armoured Brigade had virtually ceased to exist, its tanks spread the length of Cyrenaica, victim to mechanical breakdown or lack of fuel. 2nd Armoured Division's HQ and 3rd Indian Motor Brigade had been surrounded at Mechili and forced to surrender, with the exception of one regiment (the 18th Cavalry) and a scattering of troops from the other regiments which had succeeded in breaking out. The 18th Cavalry was added to the Tobruk garrison while the other survivors were sent back to Egypt to reform.

As Axis troops closed the ring around Tobruk, the British belatedly began assembling a small force on the Libyan-Egyptian frontier under Brigadier Gott to hold the Axis advanced guard at bay. There were several small clashes in April and the Germans succeeded in occupying Bardia and Halfaya Pass. However, with Tobruk strongly garrisoned in their rear the Germans could not press on until it was taken.

The first attack on Tobruk came on the night of April 13-14. It was spearheaded by the 8th Machinegun battalion and sup-

ported by the remaining tanks of 5th Light Division. (During the frantic drive across Cyrenaica Rommel's tank officers had repeatedly requested halts for maintenance, and Rommel had repeatedly denied permission. The result was a lightning advance at the cost of tremendous mechanical attrition. By the time the division arrived at Tobruk it had only 38 tanks left of its original strength of 150.) Up until this time, Rommel had enjoyed tremendous success with inadequate forces by striking swiftly and unexpectedly before the enemy was fully prepared to meet him. On April 14th, however, that run of luck came to a sudden end. The alert and aggressive Australians gave the panzers a severe mauling (knocking out 17 of the 38 tanks in action) and virtually wiped out the 8th Machinegun Battalion.

Over the next several weeks new German troops arrived from the 15th Panzer Division and took up positions around the perimeter. However, the Australians conducted an aggressive defense punctuated with numerous night commando-type raids and frequent battalion-scale counterattacks. Two attacks by the 2/48th Australian Infantry (identified in the game as the 48th Battalion) overwhelmed and wiped out the III Battalion, 61st Infantry Regiment of Trento and nearly destroyed the 3rd Bersaglieri Motorcycle Battalion of the Ariete Division's 8th Bersaglieri Regiment. Also during this time, the British sent a few tanks from Egypt to Tobruk by sea and they were added to the survivors of the 3rd Armoured Brigade to form a small mobile reserve.

On May 1, Rommel launched his second major assault on Tobruk. Better planned and with stronger forces, this attack tested the defenses of the fortress to the limit. Ultimately, however, the defenders contained the German penetration and regained part of the lost ground. Again, German armor suffered punishing casualties. The 5th Panzer Regiment's strength had risen to 81 runners before the battle, due to the untiring efforts of the regiment's maintenance personnel, but by May 2 the regiment had only 35 tanks still fit for action.

Both belligerents were now at the point of exhaustion and an uneasy point of balance was reached around Tobruk. The next major action would see the growing British force on the frontier attempt to seize the initiative from the Axis screening forces near Bardia.

## BREVITY

In early May the British received word that they would be receiving substantial armored reinforcements by the end of the month. This would enable them to launch a major attack in early June, but it also meant that they could be somewhat more aggressive with their forces currently on the frontier, weak though they might be. With more tanks due to arrive shortly, a failed attack would not be the disaster that it would have been a week earlier. Thus, it was decided to mount a modest operation by Brigadier Gott's mobile force.

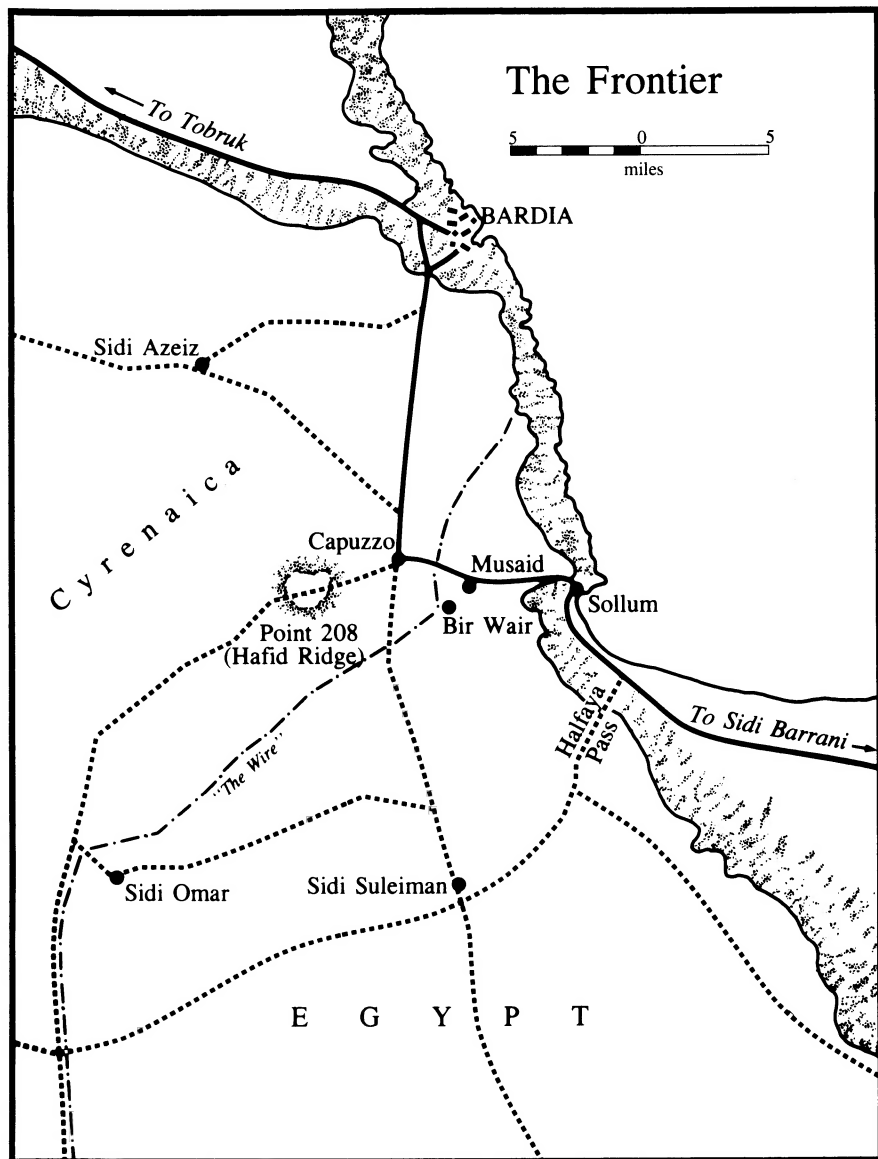
Gott's force on the frontier consisted of bits and pieces from several formations. The 7th Armoured Brigade (from 7th Armoured Division) controlled one weak tank battalion (2nd RTR, about 30 runners) and three "columns" of the 7th Armoured Division's support group. Each of these columns included a company of motorized infantry and about half a battery each of antitank guns and field guns. The tanks were the scrapings of the workshops in Egypt; most had either broken down or suffered battle damage in the winter offensive but were now being returned to service. The independent 22nd Guards Brigade had its own three motorized infantry battalions, a battalion of heavy infantry tanks (4th RTR), a battery of antitank guns, and a battalion of field guns. Both of these forces would attack the open desert flank and attempt to overrun Halfaya, Capuzzo and Bardia. If this could be accomplished, they would then continue on toward Tobruk with an eye toward lifting the siege.

On the coastal flank below the escarpment was the 2nd Rifle Brigade (a motorized infantry battalion), supported by a full battalion of field guns and a battery of antitank guns. 2nd Rifles would press up the

coast road toward Halfaya and Sollum and eventually link up with the inland force.

On the Axis side, a few severely depleted formations were attempting to hold a very large chunk of ground. Brescia and Trento were the only two infantry divisions available to hold the siege line and various frontier strongpoints, and both divisions were understrength. Brescia had left one of its six infantry battalions behind in Tripoli. Trento had detached one of its three Bersaglieri battalions to garrison the oases in the far south and one of its six infantry battalions had been destroyed in mid-April (as related earlier). Containing the troublesome Australians consumed much of the Axis strength: all of Brescia and virtually all of the infantry from the two panzer divisions and Ariete. The defense of the frontier was entrusted to Trento and a small mixed German force called "Gruppe Herff", after the commander of the 15th Motorcycle Battalion, which formed the kernel of the defense. Shortly before the Brevity attack the activity of the Australians required the Axis to reinforce the Tobruk perimeter and they did so by recalling Trento's Bersaglieri regiment. However, on May 6 the frontier force was strengthened by the dispatch of the newly-arrived recon battalion of the 15th Panzer Division as well as the II Battalion of the 5th Panzer Regiment. (This was, at this time, a composite battalion containing all 40 surviving tanks of the regiment.)

Thus, on the eve of the offensive the Axis defenders on the frontier consisted of the five surviving infantry battalions of Trento, one Bersaglieri battalion of Ariete, and four German battalions (3rd and 33rd Recon, 15th Motorcycle, and II/5th Panzer). The rest of the Axis infantry invested Tobruk while the remainder of their armor lay southeast of Tobruk, ready to intervene in either direction as needed. However, the Axis armored reserve was a force to reckon with only due to the extreme weakness of Allied armor. The I Battalion of the 8th Panzer Regiment (all of the regiment yet in Africa) had less than 50 tanks, while Ariete had a dozen medium



tanks and 30 more light tanks. In addition, there were about 40 light tanks in three separate battalions being used to stiffen the infantry on the siege lines.

Early on May 15th the British jumped off from their start line and enjoyed initial success. Although the 2nd Rifle Brigade on the coast bogged down in the face of stiff

resistance, the inland forces rolled over Herff's 15th Motorcycle battalion and drove the German recon units north. 2nd Scots Guards took upper Halfaya pass while the rest of 22nd Guards Brigade took Bir Wair and Musaid. 1st Durham Light Infantry, supported by the Matildas of 4th RTR, took Capuzzo after a sharp fight, but by this

time 4th RTR had lost nearly half its tanks and the advance stalled. Further inland the 7th Armoured Brigade Group captured Sidi Omar and drove north toward Sidi Azeiz.

Rommel reacted quickly to the British attack, dispatching tank reinforcements to the frontier and ordering Herff to counterattack with the troops at his disposal. Herff picked Capuzzo as the likely point to strike back and II/5th Panzer drove the Durham Lights back to to Musaid badly depleted. By nightfall the 2nd Rifle Brigade had cleared the area up to Sollum and 7th Armoured Brigade was near Sidi Azeiz, but Axis armor was approaching from the west and Herff's mobile forces were thick in the Sidi Azeiz-Capuzzo area.

In the early hours of May 16th, Brigadier Gott decided that 22nd Guards Brigade was too exposed to an armored counterattack and should be withdrawn. They began doing so early on the 16th while 7th Armoured Brigade remained in a covering position near Sidi Azeiz. I/8th Panzer Battalion arrived there later in the day and when the Germans began a general advance from Sidi Azeiz, 7th Armoured gave ground and skillfully withdrew to the south.

Brevity was a failure for a variety of reasons. Foremost among these was the psychological impact of the successful drive across Libya in the winter and Rommel's counterthrust in the spring. Both operations led to a dangerous preoccupation with tank strength. While British tank strength was very low during Brevity, it was backed with good mobile infantry and very powerful artillery. However, when the time came to decide whether to press on or call off the attack, tank strength was all that was considered. Had the British relied more on their infantry and artillery and less on their inadequate tank force, larger gains might have been realized.

As to the Germans, the operation alerted them to the vulnerability of their open flank and they immediately began making plans to correct this deficiency. The British ended Brevity in possession of Halfaya Pass, but Herff's strengthened frontier force attacked and recaptured that position on May

26th. The Germans then set about heavily fortifying Halfaya and a number of positions on dominating ground around it. The British would not retake the ground as easily the next time they attacked.

## **BATTLEAXE**

Two days after Halfaya fell to the Germans, General Wavell (Commander in Chief Middle East Forces) issued his orders for Operation Battleaxe. The "Tiger" convoy with tank reinforcements had arrived on May 12th (too late for its tanks to be used in Brevity) and it was felt that by mid-June the armored forces would be again battle-worthy. The lengthy delay was caused mostly by two factors. First, the variety of demands placed on the Middle East command combined with its limited resources had caused the fragmentation of its armored forces to an alarming extent. Elements of the two armored divisions (7th and 2nd) had been employed in Tobruk, the frontier, the Nile delta, Greece, Crete, and East Africa. Time was needed to reassemble the troops of 7th Armoured Division and reaccustom them to working as a unified formation. Second, the tanks sent out from England had been drawn from a variety of active units; they were not factory-fresh. Many of them needed repairs or overhauls and all had to be modified for desert service. The limited maintenance facilities in Egypt were already heavily burdened and this would take time.

Nevertheless, by mid-June 7th Armoured Division was reconstituted and was again an impressive formation. The "Tiger" convoy had brought 82 medium cruiser tanks, 135 heavy Matildas and 21 Mark VIb light tanks. Over half of the cruisers were the new A15 Crusaders, which were used to equip the 6th RTR, while the older A13s went to the 2nd RTR. These two battalions made up the 7th Armoured Brigade, which was to be the mobile strike force of the division. The two previously independent infantry tank battalions (4th and 7th RTR) were brought up to strength with new Matildas and grouped together under 4th Armoured Brigade headquarters. Slow but

very powerful, this brigade was attached to the 4th Indian Division for the offensive.

4th Indian Division, it will be remembered, had been instrumental in the early successes of the British winter offensive in 1940-41, but had then been sent to East Africa. As that campaign had now been successfully concluded, the division was returning to the desert. By mid-June, however, only the division headquarters and the 11th brigade had arrived, so the division was also given the superb 22nd Guards Brigade.

In Tobruk, tank strength had also risen following arrival of the "Tiger" convoy, and 3rd Armoured Brigade could now field over fifty operational tanks, including fifteen heavy Matildas.

Wavell's plan for Battleaxe was largely a repetition of Brevity but on a larger scale. 11th Indian Brigade was responsible for the coast below the escarpment and would attack first Halfaya and then Sollum. 22nd Guards Brigade was again responsible for attacking above the escarpment toward the Capuzzo-Musaid area, but this time was supported by nearly one hundred Matildas in 4th Armoured Brigade instead of only twenty. Inland, the 7th Armoured Division was given the rather vague task of covering 4th Indian Division's open left flank and cooperating in the destruction of Axis frontier forces. Should Axis armor counterattack in strength, it was planned that 4th Armoured Brigade would join 7th Armoured Division to defeat it. The Tobruk garrison was to sit tight and await developments; if the British armor got close to the fortress, a sortie of some sort would be organized to link up with it.

On the Axis side the situation had also improved considerably. The siege lines around Tobruk had been greatly strengthened by the arrival of the Pavia Division from Tripoli. In addition, the rest of 15th Panzer had now arrived from Germany to join Trento on the frontier. 5th Light was withdrawn into reserve for a well-deserved rest.

By mid-June, Trento had its 61st regiment (still minus one battalion) in Bardia

while the three battalions of the 62nd Regiment held defensive strongpoints in the Sollum-Capuzzo area. 15th Panzer had its I/104 Rifle Battalion at Halfaya and the 300th Oasis Battalion at Point 208 (sometimes called Hafid Ridge; hex 0822). Both positions were well fortified and formed the strong flank anchors of the frontier defenses. In addition, 88mm antiaircraft guns of the I/18th Flak Battalion had been emplaced at Halfaya to stiffen the antitank defenses. The division's 33rd Recon and Herff's 15th Motorcycle Battalion held screening outposts to the south while the 8th Panzer Regiment, now with nearly one hundred tanks, lay in reserve at Sidi Azeiz. Most of the division's infantry, however, was still in the Tobruk siege lines.

The British attack was launched on June 15th and met with mixed success. On the inland flank the 7th Armoured Brigade advanced quickly to Hafid ridge but then were stalled all day. 300th Oasis Battalion's well-entrenched defense exacted a stiff price from the British tanks and by afternoon a battalion of 5th Panzer Regiment had arrived and joined the defenses. By nightfall the brigade was down to only 48 runners. On the coast the 11th Indian Brigade ran into a brick wall at Halfaya Pass and was unable to advance all day. Only in the center did the British enjoy any clear success. At about 10:30 in the morning 4th RTR began driving in the German screen southwest of Halfaya. A battalion of 8th Panzer Regiment had begun moving south in the morning and it was soon involved in a sharp fight with 4th RTR's Matildas. Shortly after noon, 7th RTR was committed on the left of the 4th in an attack toward Capuzzo and broke the Italian resistance there. Although British infantry was slow to follow up, the Germans withdrew from 4th RTR's front and launched several unsuccessful counterattacks on 7th RTR at Capuzzo. As night fell, the Germans withdrew to lick their wounds and British infantry filtered forward to support the tanks. Halfaya still held out, but was now surrounded. 4th Armoured Brigade had fought splendidly, but was down to 40

operational Matildas.

During the night of June 15-16, Rommel hurried the main body of 5th Light, in company with elements of 15th Panzer's motorized infantry, toward Sidi Azeiz, and planned a renewed attack in the morning. 8th Panzer Regiment would again attack toward Capuzzo to pin the British in place while 5th Light Division swung wide around the desert flank to launch an attack against the Allied rear. On the Allied side, plans for the 16th included continued efforts by 4th Indian Division to capture Halfaya coupled with moves designed to increase its hold on the Capuzzo-Sollum area. 4th Armoured Brigade was to rejoin 7th Armoured Brigade and destroy the German armor in the Hafid Ridge area.

8th Panzer Regiment's attack came in hard at dawn against Capuzzo, but the two battalions of Matildas supported by the 1st Buffs drove the German tanks back with heavy losses. (8th Panzer Regiment, which started the battle with over 90 tanks, by nightfall on the 16th was down to 33 runners.) However, this attack succeeded in convincing 4th Indian Division to hold on to 4th Armoured Brigade. To the west, 7th Armoured Brigade and part of 7th Support Group grappled with 5th Light Division all day in a running fight from Hafid Ridge to Sidi Omar. The rest of 7th Support Group was holding Sidi Omar and formed a solid base for stopping the German advance. Despite repeated attempts to turn the flank of the position or break through its center, the division held for the rest of the day. By nightfall, however, it was down to about 21 runners in the armoured brigade, while 4th Armoured Brigade had 29 operational Matildas.

Both sides planned a renewal of offensive operations on the 17th. The British again planned to unite their two brigades of tanks to destroy the German armor. Rommel also planned to unite his armored forces in the Sidi Omar area for an attack eastward aimed at cutting off the British force. Once isolated, he reasoned, it could be destroyed at leisure. As it happened, the Germans got off to a quicker start and the

activity of 15th Panzer, even though it would ultimately be directed further south, again convinced 4th Indian Division to hang onto 4th Armoured Brigade. 5th Light drove east from Sidi Omar and soon reached Sidi Suleiman (hex 0524). Finally aware of the threat to their communications this move offered, the British called off their own attacks and ordered the withdrawal of their troops to Egypt. As 7th Armoured Division harassed 5th Light Division's southern flank, the dwindling force of Matildas in 4th Armoured Brigade fought a slow rearguard action that enabled 22nd Guards Brigade to withdraw intact.

In retrospect, Operation Battleaxe was not the humiliating failure it seemed at the time. Several times during the battle the Germans had been in serious trouble. Halfaya was close to running out of supplies, 8th Panzer Regiment was reduced to a shadow of its original strength, and most of the infantry and guns of the frontier defenses were overrun or scattered. Of greatest concern was the ease with which the Matilda infantry tanks turned back the panzers. Rommel at the time spoke disparagingly of the Matilda, but his tankers, particularly in 8th Panzer Regiment, had an entirely different opinion.

As to British performance, there was little at the troop level to fault. 4th Armoured Brigade fought with dogged determination throughout the battle. 7th Armoured Brigade fought with considerable dash and aggression, albeit often without much coordination. 7th Support Group demonstrated the cool-headed competence that would again be displayed in the Crusader battles. 22nd Guards and 11th Indian Brigades both fought well, although 11th Brigade was committed against a nearly impregnable position and 22nd Brigade's impressive achievements ultimately meant nothing due to the failure of the tank forces. The British had failed primarily due to a failure to coordinate the use of their tanks with other arms. British tanks fought in isolation; German tanks fought as part of an integrated team of infantry, antitank and field guns. Thus, most head-to-head tank battles ended

up a draw, but with the British armor gutted and the Germans still full of fight for the next morning.

## CRUSADER

By November of 1941, the nature of the desert fighting had changed considerably. While the spring and summer fighting had been conducted by fairly small, improvised forces, autumn had seen a considerable build-up by both sides. Past battles had been division or corps-sized operations, while the next struggle would see two complete armies locked in a battle of major proportions.

On the British side, Western Desert Force was now 13th Corps and had been joined by 30th Corps headquarters, both under the command of the newly-organized 8th Army. Most of the older units were still present, but there were many new faces.

7th Armoured Division still commanded 7th Armoured Brigade and 7th Support Group, but now also included the newly-arrived 22nd Armoured Brigade, completely equipped with new A15 Crusaders. 4th Armoured Brigade now had a full complement of the new American M3 Stuart light tank, immediately nick-named "Honeys" by their British crews. The Stuart was as good as any British cruiser in service at that time and was faster to boot.

All of the infantry tanks were now concentrated in separate Army Tank Brigades for direct support of the infantry. 4th and 7th RTR had by now been shipped to Tobruk to join the new 32nd Tank Brigade (formed from the old 3rd Armoured Brigade) while two new battalions of Matildas and one of Valentines made up the 1st Tank Brigade.

For infantry, the British now had the entire 4th Indian Division available as well as the 2nd New Zealand and 1st and 2nd South African Divisions. However, 2nd South African Division had arrived only recently and was not yet considered ready to take the field. As a result, it was not included in the initial offensive force.

In Tobruk, the 9th Australian Division had been replaced by the British 70th Divi-

sion, supported by the 32nd Tank Brigade (as mentioned above), the Polish Carpathian infantry brigade, and a battalion of Czech infantry. As it happens, it proved impossible to complete the evacuation of all of the Australians and one and a half battalions were still in Tobruk when the attack started.

The British plan was basically a still-grandier version of the one used in Brevity and Battleaxe. 13 Corps, with the 4th Indian and 2nd New Zealand Divisions, supported by 1st Tank Brigade, would attack the frontier and grind down the defenses there. 30 Corps, with 7th Armoured Division, 4th Armoured Brigade, and 1st South African Division, would cover the inland flank in a wide sweeping movement, engage the Axis armor somewhere between Tobruk and the frontier, and destroy it. Then the two corps would advance together to Tobruk and lift the siege. The Tobruk garrison would support the plan with a strong break-out attack.

On the Axis side there were many changes as well. The last two Italian divisions from Tripoli, Savona and Bologna, had both now arrived. An additional Italian division, the Trieste Motorized Division, had also been shipped over, and the Italians now had two corps headquarters in the desert. 21st Corps controlled the Pavia, Brescia, Trento and Bologna Divisions forming the siege lines around Tobruk. 20th Mobile Corps controlled the Trieste Motorized and Ariete Armored Divisions in reserve to the south and southwest, plus an assortment of light tank and recon units which bore the collective title RECAM (Raggruppamento Esplorante di Corpo d'Armata di Manovra, or Recon Group of the Mobile Army Corps). Ariete had been reinforced with the 132nd Tank Regiment and now fielded 150 medium tanks. The division's 50 remaining light tanks formed the 32nd Tank Regiment, while all other light tanks were grouped in RECAM.

The Germans had received a number of miscellaneous infantry and artillery units which were combined to form the Afrika Division. There were also more 88's at the

front, as their value at Halfaya Pass had reinforced the German's faith in their use as powerful antitank weapons. The two panzer divisions had engaged in some unit swapping to make both of them about the same strength, and 5th Light had been redesignated 21st Panzer. Both divisions now had over 100 operational tanks.

The frontier was now defended by the Savona Division in the Capuzzo-Sollum-Sidi Omar area. The I/104th Rifle Battalion (now part of 21st Panzer) still held Halfaya, which bristled with minefields and dug-in 88's. A collection of Italian border guards and machinegunners held Bardia. 21st Panzer rested in reserve between Gambut and Sidi Azeiz while 15th Panzer was north of Gambut near the coast. The Afrika Division was mostly in the Sidi Rezegh area backing up the Bologna Division. The stage was set for a battle of epic proportions.

**November 19th:** The main British armored concentration of 30 Corps was positioned, after its approach march, north of Gabr Saleh. This concentration was broken up and sent in three different directions. 22nd Armoured Brigade moved west toward Bir el Gubi, where it encountered and was roughly repulsed by Ariete. Although Ariete lost almost 50 tanks, it held its ground and knocked out about 25 British Crusaders. 7th Armored Brigade and 7th Support Group moved northwest and seized Sidi Rezegh airfield. 4th Armoured probed toward Sidi Azeiz. In 13 Corps sector the 4th Indian Division began pressuring the Axis frontier forces while the New Zealand Division assembled between Gabr Saleh and Bir Sheferzen in the vicinity of hex 0418.

Although at this point Rommel was not convinced that this was a major British offensive, he nevertheless sanctioned limited attacks by the Afrika Korps against the intruders. As a result, the tanks of 5th Panzer Regiment soon ran into part of 4th Armoured Brigade near Gabr Saleh. 3rd RTR of the brigade was miles away to the northeast with the armored cars of the King's Dragoon Guards, but the rest of the brigade stood up against the panzers and took the

worst end of an inconclusive fight, losing over 20 tanks versus about 8 panzers knocked out.

**November 20th:** With the appearance of German tanks in the Gabr Saleh area, the British began to concentrate their armor. 7th Armoured Brigade remained with 7th Support Group at Sidi Rezegh, but 22nd Armoured moved east to assist the 4th. However, the brigade did not begin to move until after noon, and by then 15th and 21st Panzer had united and beaten back 4th Armoured, knocking out 26 more Stuarts. Meanwhile, 1st South African Division took over responsibility for seizing Bir el Gubi, but with no more luck than 22nd Armoured had experienced.

On the Axis side, Pavia Division moved slightly southeast and began putting pressure on the British at Sidi Rezegh. At the same time troops of the Afrika Division moved south to contain the breakthrough. 361st Regiment held the upper escarpment east of the airfield while 155th Regiment held the area to the west (hex 1212). 15th and 21st Panzer had spent much of the morning probing cautiously to the east in the mistaken belief that the British armor had moved en masse toward Sidi Azeiz. When the divisions reached the area of hex 0821 they realized their mistake and turned back toward Gabr Saleh, 15th Panzer arriving in time to give 4th Armoured Brigade the beating described above.

**November 21st:** With troops already at Sidi Rezegh and German pressure mounting, the British decided that the time had come to launch the sortie by the Tobruk garrison. The attack was made and hex 1424 taken. At the same time both British armored brigades in the south attempted to close on Sidi Rezegh to support 7th Armoured and 7th Support Group, but were delayed by German blocking forces. 5th South African Brigade also closed on Sidi Rezegh but was stopped at hex 1112.

The Germans, realizing the extent of the British offensive at last, brought both panzer divisions back to the Sidi Rezegh area and hammered 7th Armoured and 7th Support Group. Although the British

defenders on the airfield held on, by nightfall 7th Armoured was down to only 28 runners.

**November 22nd:** While British armor again tried unsuccessfully to close in on Sidi Rezegh, their 13 Corps was active in the frontier region. 7th Indian Brigade drove the Axis defenders from Sidi Omar and the New Zealand Division was well into the Axis rear area. While 6th New Zealand Brigade began to push along the Trigh Capuzzo (the road from Capuzzo to El Adem), another brigade of the division captured Capuzzo itself and the remaining brigade closed up on Bardia. Further west, 5th South African Brigade attacked the German 155th Regiment but was repulsed.

The Germans, having managed to keep their armor concentrated so far, now purposely split it to conduct converging attacks on Sidi Rezegh from several directions. 21st Panzer swung across the escarpments and hit Sidi Rezegh from the north. 15th Panzer moved in from the east and then hit the airfield from the south. With British armor thick in the area, the result was a large tank melee with the Axis forces the clear winners by nightfall. 7th Support Group had been overrun, 7th Armored Brigade was down to 10 tanks, and 22nd Armoured could muster only 24. 4th Armoured had taken a similar beating and its remaining tanks were widely scattered. The Axis still fielded 160 runners.

**November 23rd:** Thinking the Axis forces to be as disorganized as their own, the British pulled back their armor to regroup. The remaining tanks of 7th and 22nd Armoured Brigades were formed into a composite brigade which took up position (hex 1113) just east of where 5th South African Brigade was stationed (hex 1112). Meanwhile, 6th New Zealand Brigade, supported by the infantry tanks of 8th RTR, ran into the German 361st Regiment west of Sidi Rezegh and pushed it back.

The Germans decided that the time was right for a knock-out blow against the remaining British mobile forces. All of the remaining Axis armor was concentrated and a massive attack was launched against

the British forces south of Sidi Rezegh. By nightfall the Germans had lost a third of their remaining tanks, but both 5th South African Brigade and the composite armored brigade had been destroyed.

**November 24th:** Having been severely beaten the previous day, the British regrouped and attempted to collect what scattered tanks they had. At this point, the battle should have been over as only the Axis still had a mobile striking force. As always in such a battle, however, there remained the question of the best means to make the victory complete. Cruwell, the brilliant commander of the Afrika Korps (now that Rommel held overall command of all three corps around Tobruk) argued that the surviving British armored formations should be systematically hunted down and exterminated. Rommel disagreed. Now, he felt, was the time to strike deep into the Allied rear area, cut their supply lines, and crush 13 Corps on the frontier. This decision was ultimately to cost the Germans the battle.

All three Axis armored divisions were dispatched at full speed for the frontier on Rommel's celebrated "dash to the wire" (so-called because the Libyan-Egyptian frontier was marked by a belt of barbed wire). By the end of the day elements of 21st Panzer were across the frontier southeast of Sidi Omar, but 15th Panzer was still straggling further to the west and Ariete had stalled in the face of British resistance just east of Bir el Gubi.

**November 25th:** Given a temporary reprieve, the British continued to regroup their armor and repair damaged tanks. 6th New Zealand Brigade kept the pressure up east of Sidi Rezegh and captured hex 1214, while 4th New Zealand Brigade came forward and seized hex 1314 to cover 6th Brigade's northern flank. For once, the defeat of British armor had not caused the British commanders to forget the remaining combat potential of their infantry, and the continued aggressive spirit of the infantry would ultimately win them the battle.

For the Axis, the anticipated results of the raid on the British rear were not

materializing. No supply dumps had been overrun and combat was indecisive. 21st Panzer attacked the Indian troops in the Sidi Omar area while 15th Panzer clashed with 5th New Zealand Brigade near Sidi Azeiz. Ariete was still not in the frontier area, and the panzer attacks were merely using up supplies the Axis frontier garrisons would need later.

**November 26th:** In the Tobruk area the two New Zealand Brigades pushed forward. 6th New Zealand, with the 8th RTR, captured Sidi Rezegh while 4th New Zealand, with 44th RTR in support, captured the Belhamed high ground (hex 1313). At the same time, infantry and armor of the Tobruk garrison pushed forward and captured the El Duda high ground (hex 1312). The garrison had been relieved, although the corridor was too narrow for absolute security.

Rommel was finally realizing that his raid on the frontier was getting nowhere and was allowing the British to regain the upper hand in the Tobruk area. One more attempt was made to break the British troops on the frontier, however. 21st Panzer attacked north from the Halfaya area while 15th Panzer attacked east from Sidi Azeiz, intending to link up at Capuzzo. 5th New Zealand Brigade held its ground, however, and the attacks accomplished little.

**November 27th:** Having achieved their initial objective, the British set about insuring that it would not be lost. While the Tobruk garrison troops and New Zealanders mopped up the corridor and consolidated their positions, the revitalized British armor moved north to keep the German tanks from attacking their infantry. 4th Armoured now had almost 80 Stuarts operational while 22nd Armoured had all 40 remaining cruisers.

Now was clearly the time for the Axis to concentrate and cut the corridor. 15th Panzer raced west from the Sidi Azeiz area, moved past the British armor, and settled in northeast of Sidi Rezegh. 21st Panzer worked its way around the New Zealanders toward Sidi Azeiz. Ariete, which had finally arrived northwest of Sidi Omar, turned

back and made for Sidi Rezegh.

**November 28th:** Very little took place on the 28th due to supply difficulties on the Axis side and a reluctance on the British side to commit their carefully rebuilt armor to battle. 7th Armoured Division did attack 15th Panzer, but this was little more than a probe. Meanwhile, 21st Panzer closed in on the Sidi Rezegh area.

**November 29th:** The British withdrew their armor and 1st South African Brigade to the south, waiting until the German armor was committed; this probably was a bad mistake. Meanwhile, the infantry in the corridor prepared for the inevitable attack.

The attack came from all directions. 21st Panzer moved north across the escarpment and then hit the Belhamed-Sidi Rezegh area from that direction. 15th Panzer swung wide to the south and then turned north and captured El Duda. Ariete continued to move north.

**November 30th:** An attack by an Australian battalion and tanks of the Tobruk garrison retook El Duda and re-opened the corridor, but attempts to move 1st South African Brigade north into the corridor were frustrated by the high density of Axis armor in the area.

The Axis troops, though weary, were fairly well concentrated and receiving supplies again. The Afrika Division hit Belhamed from the north. 21st Panzer hit the Belhamed-Sidi Rezegh area from along the Trigh Capuzzo. Ariete advanced from the east behind 21st Panzer and held off 1st South African Brigade. From the south, 15th Panzer smashed into the 6th New Zealand Brigade, virtually destroying it, and recaptured Sidi Rezegh.

**December 1st:** The British armor was again strangely inactive. 4th Armoured Brigade did attempt to attack east of Sidi Rezegh but was repulsed. The Axis attack maintained its tempo of the previous day. 15th Panzer drove north and pushed 4th New Zealand Brigade off Belhamed, assisted by Ariete from the east and the remaining tanks of 21st Panzer north of the Trigh Capuzzo. 21st Panzer's infantry kept 1st South African Brigade at arm's length.

By the end of the day, the New Zealand division was finished as an effective force.

**December 2nd-3rd:** Neither side attacked for two days. The Germans had sealed off the corridor and the British were uncertain as to their next move. Both sides had suffered crippling losses, but the British still had a sizeable tank force available for commitment. Axis tank strength was virtually nil. On these two days the British gradually closed in on the Axis siege ring, and the Germans experienced severe difficulties getting supplies through to the eastern part of the perimeter. Attempts by the Germans to break through to the frontier garrisons with small motorized columns led only to the loss of the troops involved.

**December 4th:** The British continued to close the ring around the Axis besiegers and attacked Bir el Gubi with 4th Armoured Brigade and 1st South African Brigade. Bir el Gubi was by now defended only by the survivors of RECAM. Nevertheless, the attack was repulsed.

**December 5th:** 11th Indian Brigade again attacked Bir El Gubi and again failed. However, the mounting pressure to their rear caused the Germans to send their remaining mobile forces southwest. 11th Indian Brigade was badly hurt by the attack, but there was little strength now left to keep the Germans from re-opening the corridor to Tobruk.

**December 6th:** The British re-opened the corridor, mostly because Rommel had decided to concede it to them. The main impediments were Axis troops withdrawing from the northeast siege lines. By nightfall, the surviving Axis troops had disengaged and were on their way west. The siege of Tobruk had been lifted, although at tremendous cost. In the end, the British armor had remained "a fleet in being" while the Axis had been forced to grind themselves down in assaults against superb infantry in good positions. The battle had been won by the narrowest of margins.

## THE BENGHAZI HANDICAP

Throughout December the shattered Axis army withdrew across Cyrenaica in the

hope of finding a good position at which to make a stand. The British pursued as well as their tired and depleted forces could, and by December 23rd were in the Msus-Soluch-Antelat area, while Rommel's troops were strung out from Benghazi south. The Brescia division held the Benghazi perimeter while demolitions to the port facilities were underway. Trieste held Ghemines to the south, keeping open Brescia's line of retreat. 15th and 21st Panzer were in the Beda Fomm-Antelat area, with Ariete in reserve, to hold off British mobile forces. The rest of the Axis infantry (Trento, Pavia, Bologna, and the Afrika Division, now redesignated 90th Light Africa Division) defended Agedabia. All were severely understrength but on the 19th a convoy had arrived at Benghazi with 22 German tanks and 23 more arrived the same day at Tripoli. A few more had been repaired and so by December 28th the Afrika Korps had about 60 operational tanks (of which sixteen were Panzer II's and the rest medium Panzer III's and IV's).

At this point, Rommel decided to strike back to delay the British pursuit. The main British armored force was by now the 22nd Armoured Brigade, which fielded 35 Stuarts and 55 Crusaders. The Axis had fallen back to El Agheila and the British were in the Agedabia area. 22nd Armoured Brigade was somewhat south of there and had drifted out of supporting range of infantry and artillery. Both panzer divisions hit the brigade and though the British had more tanks the Germans used theirs as part of an integrated all-arms team. By nightfall the British had lost 37 tanks and were falling back. The Germans lost only seven. Encouraged by this success, Rommel struck again on December 30th. 22nd Armoured had repaired a few tanks and received a few more as replacements, so was up to 62 runners, but lost 23 of them in this action and again ended the day in retreat. The Germans again lost only seven tanks. 22nd Armoured had now lost almost all of its Crusaders and many of its Stuarts and was withdrawn from the front to refit. The Germans were able to complete the withdrawal

of their troops to El Agheila unmolested by British pursuit.

Meanwhile, the Axis frontier garrisons remained surrounded and throughout December and January were subjected to systematic efforts by 2nd South African Division to reduce their defenses. 3rd South African Brigade attacked the Bardia perimeter on December 16th but the Italian defenders, reinforced by a sprinkling of German infantry, put up a surprisingly stiff resistance and the attack was called off after two days of close combat. Instead, a major attack was planned for the end of December, to be carried forward by 3rd and 4th South African Brigades, supported by the Matildas and Valentines of 8th and 44th RTR and the New Zealand divisional cavalry battalion. After two days of intense fighting, the garrison surrendered on January 2nd.

The Sollum-Halfaya region was next. On January 11th the 6th South African Brigade took Sollum and plans were begun for a major assault on the Halfaya fortifications. As it happened, the assault was not necessary. Supplies ran out at Halfaya before the attack could be launched and the Savona Division and I/104th Motorized Infantry were forced to surrender.

By the end of January, the situation in Cyrenaica was reminiscent of that in the spring of 1941 when Rommel launched his first offensive. The British defense force consisted of one understrength and inexperienced armored division and one infantry division. Due to supply problems, neither division could maintain all of its troops in the forward defensive positions.

The mobile formation was 1st Armoured Division. The division's organic armored brigades were the 2nd and 22nd. The 22nd, however, had come out to the desert early and fought with 7th Armoured Division during Crusader. In late December it had been the last operational armored brigade available and its rough handling by the Afrika Korps had caused it to be withdrawn (as related above). Thus, 1st Armoured Division had only one armored brigade forward, and it was inexperienced in desert

fighting.

The infantry force was provided by 4th Indian Division. This was a veteran unit by now, but somewhat depleted by the Crusader battles. One brigade was forward at Benghazi, one further to the rear at Barce, and the remaining brigade was reforming in Tobruk.

Although still somewhat battered, Rommel's forces had nevertheless recovered considerably since the beginning of the retreat from Tobruk, and on January 5th an additional convoy arrived with 54 more tanks. The army was also reinforced with an additional infantry division (Sabratha) to replace the Savona, which had been lost at Halfaya.

With these forces, Rommel launched a counteroffensive which, by early February, had driven the 8th Army back to the vicinity of Gazala. Many opportunities to inflict a severe check on the Axis columns were ignored and the command structure of 8th Army proved extremely top-heavy and prone to lapse into bitter arguments. Nevertheless, the British did manage to withdraw their forces reasonably intact and hold a line well forward of Tobruk. Thus Rommel's winter offensive of 1942 inflicted a reverse on the British, as opposed to his first offensive which had precipitated a disaster.

Both sides now settled down along a line which ran from Bir Hachiem to Gazala and began the lengthy process of making good the many losses suffered in the winter fighting. It would be late May before the two armies would again be fit to fight. But that struggle, when it came, would be the greatest yet witnessed in Africa.

## **GAZALA**

By May of 1942, the British had built up a formidable line of defenses between Gazala and Bir Hachiem. These defenses consisted of a series of defended localities, designed for occupation by a brigade of infantry, surrounded by minefields. Each such locality was called a "brigade box", and the boxes were linked with additional minefields to make the defenses continuous. Most of the line was the responsibility of

13 Corps. 1st South African Division held the area closest to the coast, from Gazala south to Alam Hamza. South of Alam Hamza were two brigades of the 50th Division, the 69th and 151st, and in reserve behind them were the infantry tanks of 32nd Tank Brigade. There was then something of a gap followed by the 150th Brigade box overlooking the Trigh Capuzzo, with 1st Tank Brigade in support.

The southern terminus of the line was Bir Hachiem, the responsibility of the tough 1st Free French Brigade. This brigade was part of 30 Corps, as it was (rightly) thought that the southern end of the line would be party to much of the mobile tank fighting of the coming battle. 30 Corps also controlled both armored divisions available: 1st and 7th. 7th Armoured Division was the mobile force in the south and nominally commanded 1st Free French Brigade as well as its own units. The other brigades of the division were the 3rd Indian Motor, 7th Motor, and 4th Armoured.

3rd Indian Motor had served briefly in the desert in the spring of 1941, it may be remembered, before being overrun and nearly destroyed. The brigade had finally been reformed and was again in the desert, again under command of a British armored division, and again would be committed virtually without any antitank guns. It was stationed south of Bir Hachiem to give warning of any Axis attempt to turn the flank of the line. Further east, the 7th Motor Brigade (formed from the old 7th Support Group) held the Retma area as a backstop to the 3rd Indian. 4th Armoured Brigade was stationed north of 7th Motor in a general reserve position.

1st Armoured Division controlled 2nd and 22nd Armoured Brigades and the 201st Guards Motor Brigade. 1st Armoured's support group had been badly mauled in the retreat to Gazala and so the old 22nd Guards Brigade had been redesignated 201st Guards Motor and assigned to the division. The division was concentrated loosely around the road junction at Knightsbridge (hex 1307). Overall, 30 Corps had about 150 Grants, a similar number of

Stuarts, and about 250 Crusaders. 13 Corps had about 100 Matildas and 150 Valentines.

2nd South African Division defended Tobruk under the general command of 13 Corps. One brigade of the division had been switched to 1st South African Division to replace 5th Brigade, which had been nearly destroyed in the Crusader battles. As replacement, the 9th Indian Infantry Brigade from 5th Indian Division was assigned to the division to hold the southern perimeter and the El Adem area. 29th Indian Brigade, also from 5th Division, was at Bir el Gubi in the south.

The British defensive plan was simple in concept and essentially sound. The Gazala line was presumed to be strong enough to either frustrate attempts at a direct assault or cause sufficient casualties to give British mobile forces a decisive superiority in the subsequent mobile phase. Thus, it was assumed that Rommel would attempt to turn the line's southern flank. Once he did so, he would have two options: either turn north and attempt to crumble the line from the rear or drive directly on Tobruk. If he chose the first option, the British armored divisions would be in position to fall on his flank, drive his mobile forces against the anvil of the Gazala line to the east, and destroy him. If he chose the second option he would be heading straight into the teeth of British armor fighting on good defensive ground of its own choosing, and would be hampered by an increasingly long and precarious supply line. In either event, the prospects of a successful battle for the British seemed good.

On the Axis side, Panzerarmee Afrika had lost a division (Bologna) disbanded due to losses, but the other divisions were stronger than they had ever been. The two panzer divisions had between them 330 tanks, of which only 50 were Panzer II's, the rest being Panzer III and IV mediums. 90th Light was now fully motorized and had taken over the 200th Regiment. Each panzer division had only one motorized regiment, but by German standards it was a strong one with three battalions, and all of the German motorized infantry was well-

supplied with antitank guns.

The Italian 20th Mobile Corps was also much better equipped than it had been for the Crusader fighting. An additional armored division, Littorio, was being shipped over but its tank regiment, sent earlier, had mostly been used to re-equip Ariete and Trieste. Of the tank battalions which had fought in Crusader, only the 8th and 9th Medium Battalions had survived, and all remaining tanks had been pooled in these two units. Littorio was shipped with the 10th, 11th, and 12th Medium Battalions, but the 12th was sunk in transit. The 10th was assigned to Ariete as its third medium battalion and the 11th was assigned to Trieste to increase its offensive potential. During the course of the battle a number of replacement tanks were shipped which allowed the 12th Battalion to reform at Tripoli and the independent 51st Battalion was sent over as well. Late in the Gazala fighting Littorio would make its appearance commanding these two tank battalions. As a result of the above unit shuffling, 20th Corps would go into action at Gazala with over 200 medium tanks, not counting those of the Littorio Division still in Tripoli.

The four surviving Italian infantry divisions of 10th and 21st Corps were combined under the German General Cruwell as "Group Cruwell" and were reinforced with several battalions from 90th Light Division.

The Axis plan was for Group Cruwell to launch pinning attacks against the front of the Gazala line to hold the British infantry in place and draw their armored reserve forward, while the Afrika Korps and 20th Mobile Corps would swing wide around the southern flank of the line, engage and destroy the British armor, and then exploit toward Tobruk.

**May 27th:** The Axis attack began with Group Cruwell's attack, but British aerial recon had indicated a substantial concentration of armor further south, and thus Cruwell's attack did little to confuse the British. When the Axis armor started rolling, however, the British still seemed to be caught off balance.

The first unit to be hit was 3rd Indian Motor Brigade, which put up a spirited but brief resistance before being overrun and destroyed as an effective unit. Once more, 3rd Indian Brigade had not survived its first major encounter with the enemy and again the survivors were sent back to Egypt to reform. Next, 90th Light hit 7th Motor Brigade at Retma and pushed it back toward Bir El Gubi. The remaining brigade of 7th Armoured Division, 4th Armoured, began moving south to support 7th Motor Brigade and was hit by the entire 15th Panzer Division. In the confused fighting which ensued both sides suffered heavy losses, but 4th Armoured was pushed back toward El Adem and was temporarily out of the battle, while 15th Panzer was still full of fight.

By this time, 30 Corps had ordered 1st Armoured Division to move south. 22nd Armoured was further south than 2nd and encountered the Germans first. Both panzer divisions hit the brigade hard and knocked out about 30 tanks before the brigade gave ground and fell back toward Knightsbridge and the 201st Guards Brigade box. As the Germans followed up their initial success, 2nd Armoured Brigade hit them from the west and 1st Tank Brigade raked their eastern flank. By the end of the day, the two panzer divisions had lost about a third of their tanks and had stalled south of Knightsbridge.

Further east, Ariete and Trieste had been instructed to move against Bir Hachiem and overrun it to make the southern supply route safer. Through a series of mistaken orders and poor navigation, Trieste hit the line too far north, between Bir Hachiem and the 150th Brigade box position, and became bogged down in the minefields. Ariete attacked Bir Hachiem with considerable spirit but succeeded only in losing a good proportion of its tanks.

**May 28th:** Rommel continued the attack, but its scope was limited by worrisome supply difficulties. The main supply columns intended to follow the Afrika Korps had not advanced into the fierce armor melee northeast of Bir Hachiem, and British motorized and recon troops still lay thick

about the area. 15th and 21st Panzer were on their own for the time being. Rommel nevertheless sent 21st Panzer north to disrupt the British rear areas and explore the depth of the position. 15th Panzer remained in place while Ariete drove north to link up with the Afrika Korps and 90th Light closed in on El Adem. The British had anticipated a more general northern move and positioned themselves to take it in flank. While 22nd Armoured maintained contact with the relatively quiet 15th Panzer, 2nd Armoured and 1st Tank Brigades repeated their double flank attack of the previous day, but this time against Ariete. Ariete was stalled to the south of 15th Panzer, but gave nearly as well as it got. 90th Light ran into a rested and regrouped 4th Armoured Brigade at El Adem and was pushed back to the south. 21st Panzer reached the escarpment overlooking the coast road but did little else.

By the end of the day, events in general seemed to be going in favor of the British. Of an initial tank force of about 550, the Axis had already lost almost 200, and the remaining force was badly scattered. The British, on the other hand, were in a position to immediately concentrate about 250 cruisers and 100 infantry tanks against Afrika Korps, not counting 1st Tank Brigade, which was now moving west to support 150th Infantry Brigade against pressure from Group Cruwell and the Trieste Division.

**May 29th:** It was obvious that the Axis offensive was, at least for the moment, derailed. The first priority for Rommel was thus to attempt to regain his balance by concentrating the Axis armor and getting supplies through to it. The three Axis armored divisions began concentrating to the west and southwest of Knightsbridge. 2nd Armoured Brigade attacked in the morning and soon found itself virtually surrounded; 21st Panzer hit it from the north, 15th from the west, and Ariete from the south. Two more battalions of tanks from 22nd Armoured Brigade joined in, but by nightfall the British had been pushed back again,

badly battered.

Although the three Axis divisions had also taken heavy casualties, they were now well concentrated and Rommel had personally led a resupply convoy around Bir Hachiem and through to the panzers. To the west, the Sabratha Division had put in an attack north of Alam Hamza against the South African positions but had lost about 400 men for their trouble. Trieste forced 150th Brigade to pull in its outposts to the south, but little else happened of note west of the minefields. One notable loss to the Axis was the capture of General Cruwell himself. He was shot down while conducting a reconnaissance in an observation plane and crash-landed in the British positions. Field Marshal Kesselring, who was visiting the front, took over Cruwell's command for the remainder of the battle, even though he was superior to Rommel in rank. (Rommel was not made field marshal until shortly after the Gazala battles.)

**May 30th:** Since the Axis armor did not seem strong enough to force an immediate decision, it was clear that the battle would be a protracted one, and that meant that it was vital to open a secure supply line. Consequently, strong detachments of the Afrika Korps began moving west in the early morning to break through the minefields from the east and link up with Group Cruwell. Almost immediately they ran into the positions occupied by 150th Brigade and 1st Tank Brigade and were halted.

To the east, 1st Armoured Division renewed its attack on the Axis armor but ran into a tough antitank screen that stopped it cold with considerable losses. The Germans and Italians were beginning to defend in place and were now taking a serious toll of advancing British armor. By the end of the day 1st Armoured Division was temporarily spent and 7th Armoured was scattered in the south.

**May 31st:** Rommel's situation was now becoming desperate. Although the British armor had let up its pressure from the east, it was still in possession of strong defensive ground and had him hemmed in. To the west lay the minefields and their stubborn

defenders. Unless the Germans and Italians could break through soon, Afrika Korps would perish from lack of supply. Trieste now began attacking strongly from the west while 90th Light joined in from the east. Nevertheless, 150th Brigade and its supporting infantry tanks held.

Fortunately for the Germans, British armor spent the day regrouping and did not interfere with Axis efforts.

**June 1st:** Again the British armor stood quietly by while 150th Brigade fought its epic defense against the five best Axis divisions in Africa. By early afternoon the uneven contest was over and Rommel had a direct supply line through the heart of the Gazala line. The turning point of the battle had been reached.

**June 2nd:** Although in a much stronger position than he had been in since the start of the battle, Rommel was still not ready to undertake major offensive action. His battered armored divisions still needed time to replenish. Nevertheless, several peripheral attacks were launched. 21st Panzer launched a strong probe toward the north and pushed back 5th RTR (of 4th Armoured Brigade), which lost 20 tanks in the process. At the same time, Trieste and 90th Light were dispatched south to tighten the siege of Bir Hachiem. Although one supply line was now opened, Bir Hachiem would be a dangerous enemy base to leave intact in his rear once Rommel began his advance. By the end of the day the Afrika Korps reported 130 operational tanks (out of a starting strength of over 300), but the numbers were growing as additional tanks were repaired.

**June 3rd-4th:** Neither side took any major offensive action as both combatants attempted to build up their armored strength and rearrange their units in preparation for the next round.

**June 5th:** In the early morning hours the British attack on the Axis armor finally came. The Axis enclave east of the minefield was by now referred to as "the cauldron". The plan was to attack in two major waves. The first wave would consist of 10th Indian Brigade attacking from the

east and 32nd Tank Brigade (with one battalion of infantry, the 7th Green Howards) hitting the Axis positions from the south. After this wave had broken through the outer defenses the second wave would exploit through the breach and destroy the Axis forces in the cauldron. The second wave consisted of 7th Armoured Division (commanding 22nd Armoured Brigade and 9th Indian Brigade, since its own brigades were too battered by this time to participate in the attack). The rest of 1st Armoured Division would guard against a breakout attempt and stand in general reserve.

The attack was a catastrophe. The dawn attack by 32nd Tank Brigade in the south ran into intense antitank and artillery fire and achieved nothing except the loss of 50 of the brigade's starting strength of 70 infantry tanks. The attack from the east did better initially, but when 22nd Armoured Brigade was committed it ran into the same intense antitank fire and was then met by a counterattack by 15th Panzer that drove it back to its start line. By afternoon the Germans were on the offensive again. Ariete and 21st Panzer drove due east while 15th Panzer closed on Knightsbridge. The British armor was driven helter-skelter in all directions, 22nd Armoured Brigade having lost over 60 tanks that day.

**June 6th:** There now remained in the cauldron the isolated battalions of 9th Indian Brigade. While the main British force licked its wounds further to the east, Afrika Korps systematically destroyed the survivors of the previous day's infantry attack.

**June 7th-10th:** While the armored forces again regrouped, 90th Light and Trieste increased the pressure on Bir Hachiem. Several attempts were made to storm the desert fortress accompanied by strong Luftwaffe support, but the French continued to hold out. Finally the defenses began to crack and on the night of June 10th the French launched a breakout attempt, assisted by the 7th Motor Brigade and 29th Indian Brigade, both of which had been harassing the Axis communication lines. The majority of the garrison succeeded in breaking out and moved east to join the

frontier defenses.

**June 11th:** Throughout the struggle for Bir Hachiem the rest of the 8th Army had remained on the defensive. It was the British hope that Rommel would attack and thus use up his remaining tank strength. British armor could then counterattack and gain a decisive advantage. Rommel, however, refused to be drawn out so long as Bir Hachiem remained a thorn in his side. Once it was reduced, his mobile troops were again concentrated and ready for an attack. The Afrika Korps was by now back up to 150 runners and there were about 60 operational Italian medium tanks. The British had 80 infantry tanks, 77 Grants, 52 Crusaders, and 56 Stuarts fit to fight. All three Axis armored divisions now began a cautious advance toward El Adem. This had not progressed far by nightfall, but the British now had a good idea as to the location of the Axis armor and, thinking it to be very widely dispersed, they decided to counterattack the next morning.

**June 12th:** Due to confusion on the part of the British (in large part caused by the capture of one of the division commanders) a definite plan of action was not agreed upon by morning and 2nd and 4th Armoured Brigades remained on the defensive. The Afrika Korps was now starting to move again, however, and while 15th Panzer hit the two brigades from the front 21st Panzer swung wide and hit them from the rear. In a confused running fight, into which the rest of the British armor was eventually drawn, the British tanks were pushed back and mauled throughout the day. The three armored brigades lost 105 tanks while the 32nd Tank Brigade (commanding all 60 remaining infantry tanks) lost a further 33.

**June 13th:** The day dawned again with British armor scattered and Axis armor concentrated. As the remaining British tanks formed a screen to the north of the Afrika Korps to protect the rear of 13 Corps, 15th and 21st Panzer renewed their attack and again inflicted heavy losses on the British, driving them from position after position. Knightsbridge was now nearly

surrounded and in the evening its garrison was evacuated.

**June 14th:** Now it was clear to the British that their armor could not defend the open ground between Gazala and Tobruk. That being the case, 1st South African and 50th Divisions, still holding their positions in the Gazala line, were clearly in great danger, and they were ordered to withdraw toward Egypt after dark.

Rommel also sensed the growing weakness of the British mobile troops and drove the Afrika Korps frantically north to cut off the retreat routes of the divisions still in the Gazala Line. However, the tankers and infantry of Afrika Korps were now on the point of total exhaustion and proved unable to overcome the Allied resistance at Acroma and along the escarpment overlooking the coast road.

That evening 1st South African Division successfully withdrew to the east along the coast road while 50th Division attacked southwest through Italian 10th Corps' infantry screen and broke clean through. Although it would take some time, 50th Division safely made its way around Bir Hachiem and back to the Egyptian frontier.

**June 15th-17th:** While few major tank battles took place for several days, low-intensity combat raged across much of the battlefield. In a series of small successes, none of them overwhelming, the Axis forces gradually drove the remaining mobile British forces away from Tobruk and back to the Egyptian frontier. The climax came on the morning of June 17th when 15th and 21st Panzer collided with 4th Armoured Brigade, virtually the only remaining serviceable British armor, near the Belhamed high ground southeast of Tobruk. By nightfall the Germans had broken through and cut the coast road; 4th Armoured Brigade, now down to 58 runners, withdrew toward the frontier.

**June 18th-19th:** On the morning of June 18th Rommel reported to his superiors that Tobruk was again surrounded. This time, however, there would be no lengthy siege. Two days would be spent preparing for the attack and then a strong assault by all three

armored divisions would be launched to take the fortress once and for all. Both the 18th and 19th were spent in preparation.

On the British side, the prospects for a prolonged defense of Tobruk did not look good. The garrison consisted of the 4th and 6th South African Brigades, 11th Indian Brigade, and the few remnants of 32nd Tank Brigade. Thus, the garrison was considerably weaker than it had been previously, and this was compounded by the fact that many of the minefields had been lifted from the perimeter to build the Gazala line. Supplies were not as plentiful and the 2nd South African Division was not as experienced nor as well trained as had been the previous defenders.

**June 20th:** The attack was preceded by a very heavy air bombardment and came in against the positions of 11th Indian Brigade. The Afrika Korps (with both 15th and 21st Panzer) formed the main attack while 20th Corps (Ariete and Trieste) put in an additional attack on their left flank. By nightfall the outer perimeter had been breached, 11th Indian Brigade had been mostly destroyed, and advanced parties from the Afrika Korps overlooked Tobruk harbor. All that remained was to mop up the isolated and outflanked defenders. Tobruk, the fortress which had held up Rommel's plans for an invasion of Egypt for over a year, had finally fallen. The gateway to the Suez Canal lay open at last.

## AFTERMATH

Gazala was a great victory for Rommel and the Afrika Korps, and no one at the time would have believed that it would be their last. In retrospect, Gazala was a pyrrhic victory, one which burned out the Afrika Korps and rendered a lightning conquest of Egypt nearly an impossibility.

But that didn't stop Rommel from trying. He drove his few remaining exhausted infantrymen and worn out tanks mercilessly. By the time they reached Mersa Matruh, halfway between the Egyptian frontier and the Nile delta, Afrika Korps was down to about 60 tanks and no more than two or three thousand combat infantrymen. The

Italian 20th Corps, even now reinforced with the Littorio Division, totalled only 44 tanks and about the same amount of infantry as the Germans. That they were able to lever the British, who by then commanded over 150 tanks and several reasonably fresh divisions of infantry, from the Matruh positions is a measure of the extent to which Rommel's mystique now nearly paralyzed the British high command.

Fortunately for the British, General Auchinleck, the commander in the Middle East, did not share this faith in Rommel's infallibility, and quickly built up a defensive line at El Alamein. When Rommel reached the Alamein Line, there was much confused fighting, but the truth was that Panzerarmee Afrika was exhausted and at the end of a tenuous supply line. The Panzerarmee never recovered its old aggressive spirit and, although it still fought well throughout its career, its days were clearly numbered. The twin catastrophes of November 1942, Montgomery's massive offensive at El Alamein and the Allied landings in Rommel's rear along the French African coast, were the beginning of the end for the Afrika Korps, and all that remained was the long delaying action, punctuated by occasionally brilliant counterattacks, that led slowly but inevitably to the final surrender of all Axis troops in Africa.

## Tanks In The Desert

### BRITISH

**Mark VIb Light:** The Mark VIb was the standard light tank in British service at the outbreak of the war and was the most numerous type in service in the desert throughout 1940 and the British winter offensive of 1940-41. However, as production priority concentrated on gun-armed cruiser and infantry tanks, the light tank force quickly dwindled from combat and mechanical attrition. Still fairly numerous when Rommel launched his first offensive in March-April of 1941, by the time he reached Tobruk virtually all of them had been lost. A handful of Mark

Vlb's were manned by the 3rd Hussars in Tobruk as part of 3rd Armoured Brigade during Brevity and Battleaxe, but all other remaining vehicles were relegated to recon duty with infantry divisions until their advanced state of mechanical decrepitude caused their withdrawal from service.

*Weight:* 6 tons. *Speed:* 35 mph. *Armament:* one .50 machinegun, one .303 machinegun. *Thickest Armor:* 14mm.

**A10 Cruiser:** The mainstays of the British medium tank force at the start of the war were the A9 and A10 cruisers. There were 125 A9's and 175 A10's (a slower but more heavily armored version of the A9) produced. Most of these ultimately saw service in the desert. However, these tanks were showing their age by the end of the British winter offensive of 1940-41 and their number declined steadily from then. Most of the cruisers available for Brevity were A10's dredged from the Egyptian workshops and by November of 1941 the last scrapings of old cruisers were used to equip the 7th Hussars of 7th Armoured Brigade. After the Crusader battles the A10 disappeared for good.

*Weight:* 16 tons. *Speed:* 16 mph. *Armament:* 2 pounder (40mm) gun, two .303 machineguns. *Thickest Armor:* 30mm.

**A13 Cruiser:** The A13 was a vast improvement over the older A9's and A10's, combining the armored protection of the latter with a very good turn of speed for its day. About 35 A13's were available in 4th RTR for the British winter offensive of 1940-41 and proved extremely useful. Later, 5th RTR was sent to the desert fully equipped with A13's but lost most of them in the retreat to Tobruk in the spring of 1941. A small A13 cruiser unit was built up in Tobruk from tanks repaired in Egypt and manned by the 1st RTR throughout the summer of 1941, and the 2nd RTR rode A13s during Battleaxe. By then, however, the heavier A15 was becoming available and the A13's were beginning to wear out. By the Crusader battles only 2nd RTR in

7th Armoured Brigade rode A13's, and by Gazala the A13 was gone.

*Weight:* 17 tons. *Speed:* 30 mph. *Armament:* 2 pounder (40mm) gun, one .303 machinegun. *Thickest Armor:* 30mm.

### **A15 Cruiser (Crusader):**

The A15 Crusader made its combat debut during Operation Battleaxe and proved something of a disappointment. It did not seem as survivable as had been expected given the amount of armor it carried, and its power plant caused some mechanical difficulties. Also, the British tankers wanted a tank with a better gun than the 2 pounder. (Although the 2 pounder was not really such a bad weapon; British armor commanders simply tended to blame their basically sound equipment for their repeated tactical failures, an excellent example of the poor carpenter blaming his tools.) The Crusader was gradually improved and although never an outstanding tank it served with workmanlike efficiency throughout the desert fighting.

*Weight:* 21 tons. *Speed:* 27 mph. *Armament:* 2 pounder (40mm) gun, two .303 machineguns. *Thickest Armor:* 49mm.

### **Matilda Infantry Tank:**

The Matilda was underrated by almost everyone except German tank crews, which is interesting in and of itself. The British tended to see the difficulty of coordinating attacks between speedy cruisers and the lumbering infantry tanks. Rommel dismissed the Matilda as an effective weapon because it was called an infantry tank but was not provided with high explosive shells to deal with entrenched enemy infantry. But German tankers had to face Matildas and soon contended that German tanks had only one advantage over Matildas: they could outrun them—and that there was only one truly effective tactical solution to fighting them: withdraw and hope they broke down soon. Fortunately for the Germans, Matildas were not available in significant numbers until the Axis forces also had numbers of 88mm flak guns sited forward for antitank work. Even a Matilda's heavy armor was

no defense against an 88, and their slow speed meant that they were quite often used to support infantry attacks against just such positions as these. The Matilda's main problem (aside from mechanical unreliability) was that it was a complicated, difficult, and expensive tank to produce. Thus it was soon superseded by other types on the production line and its number gradually dwindled.

*Weight:* 30 tons. *Speed:* 15 mph. *Armament:* one 2 pounder (40mm) gun, one .303 machinegun. *Thickest Armor:* 78mm.

#### **Valentine Infantry Tank:**

Intended as a replacement for the Matilda, the Valentine was no better armed and had thinner armor. However, it was a much easier tank to produce and at this stage of the war quantity production was important to the British. Valentines were first used during the Crusader battles and were an increasingly important component of British infantry tank strength for the rest of the desert war.

*Weight:* 20 tons. *Speed:* 15 mph. *Armament:* one 2 pounder (40mm) gun, one .303 machinegun. *Thickest Armor:* 65mm.

**Stuart:** The M3 Stuart was a U.S. light tank but served in the desert as a "cruiser" with the British. Its armor was as good as any of the other cruisers except for the A15 Crusader, and the high velocity 37mm was the equal of the British 2 pounder. In addition, it was an extremely fast tank, a definite plus in the desert. The British immediately gave the tank the affectionate nickname "Honey". The initial consignment of Stuarts was used to equip the 4th Armoured Brigade for Operation Crusader; later it was used by a number of British tank units.

*Weight:* 14 tons. *Speed:* 31 mph. *Armament:* one 37mm gun, three .30 machineguns. *Thickest Armor:* 44mm.

**Grant:** When the Grant (another American tank) arrived before the Gazala battles, it was the answer to many of the prayers of the British tankers. Its main strength lay in its hull-mounted 75mm gun, which finally gave the British a large-

caliber antitank weapon capable of hitting at long range and also capable of firing high explosive shells. Disadvantages were slow speed and a high silhouette made more awkward by the necessity to expose the entire tank to enemy observation before the hull-mounted gun could be brought to bear. So needed was the 75mm gun, however, that the British accepted these limitations cheerfully. At Gazala, all battalions with Grants also had a proportion of A15 Crusaders or M-3 Stuarts as well. For game purposes, we have made the three battalions of a brigade "pure" units of Grants, Stuarts, or Crusaders to better showcase the different characteristics of the tanks. The total number of each type is correct.

*Weight:* 31 tons. *Speed:* 22 mph. *Armament:* one 75mm gun, one 37mm gun, four .30 machineguns. *Thickest Armor:* 57mm.

## **ITALIAN**

**L3 Tankette:** Originally introduced in 1933, the most common model of the L3 in the desert was the improved 1935 model. Poorly armed and armored, it was nearly useless in modern mobile warfare. Several hundred were in North Africa when the British launched their winter offensive in 1940, and almost all were lost. Several hundred more were later shipped over and these were all lost by the end of 1941.

*Weight:* 3 tons. *Speed:* 26 mph. *Armament:* two 8mm machineguns. *Thickest Armor:* 13.5mm.

**L6 Light Tank:** The L6 was a great improvement over the L3, but by the time it was available it was already obsolete. In 1940 a light tank with 30mm of armor and a 20mm gun would have been a useful addition to either side's arsenal; by the summer of 1942 it was anachronistic. The only unit to use L6's at Gazala, the Lancieri di Novara, arrived at the front in time to put in one spirited attack which cost the unit virtually its entire tank strength.

*Weight:* 7 tons. *Speed:* 26 mph. *Armament:* one 20mm gun, one 8mm machinegun. *Thickest Armor:* 30mm.

**M13 Medium Tank:** The M13 made its first appearance in the desert in December of 1940. At first available in fairly small numbers, it had become the primary battle tank in the Italian armored units by mid-1941. Although more than adequate by the standards of 1940, by mid-'41 it was clearly outmoded. Unfortunately, no replacement was available. Some of the M13 units at Gazala were actually equipped with the M14, but this variant of the M13 did not differ significantly from its predecessor.

*Weight:* 14 tons. *Speed:* 20 mph. *Armament:* one 47mm gun, four 8mm machineguns. *Thickest Armor:* 40mm.

## GERMAN

**A Note on German Panzer Battalions:** All Italian and British tank units are presented as equipped with a single type of tank. Although this was not always the case, it was by far the most common. The Germans, on the other hand, relied exclusively on mixed battalions. Each unit contained a combination of all types of tanks to enable the battalion to undertake any task it might be called upon to perform. Game ratings for a panzer battalion are based on such a mixed unit. The specific types used are discussed below.

**PzKw I:** The Panzer I was a pre-war training tank which was forced into combat duty in 1939 by lack of more modern types. It was slow for a light tank and of very limited combat value. Nevertheless, it made up between 10 and 20% of 5th Light Division's tank strength upon arrival in Africa. By late 1941 it had been withdrawn from service with the panzer regiments.

*Weight:* 6 tons. *Speed:* 23 mph. *Armament:* two 7.92mm machineguns. *Thickest Armor:* 25mm.

**PzKw II:** The Panzer II was another pre-war training tank, but had considerably better combat potential. Fast and reasonably well-armored, it was a valuable light tank and remained in service through the Gazala

fighting (although in diminishing numbers). Over 30% of 5th Light Division's tank strength upon arrival consisted of Panzer II's.

*Weight:* 10 tons. *Speed:* 35 mph. *Armament:* one 20mm gun, one 7.92mm machinegun. *Thickest Armor:* 35mm.

**PzKw III:** The Panzer III was the main German tank throughout the desert war.

Its basic soundness of design meant that it could be successively upgraded with more armor and longer guns so that it tended to keep pace with newer British equipment.

*Weight:* 19 tons. *Speed:* 25 mph. *Armament:* one 50mm gun, two 7.92mm machineguns. *Thickest Armor:* 50mm.

**PzKw IV:** The Panzer IV was, at this stage of the war, considered a support tank. Its main armament was a short-barreled, low-velocity 75mm gun intended to lob high explosive rounds at infantry and antitank gun emplacements. After the Gazala battles, Panzer IV's were increasingly fitted with high velocity 75mm guns and ultimately became the main battle tank for German forces. That development came after the period covered by this game, however.

*Weight:* 21 tons. *Speed:* 25 mph. *Armament:* one 75mm gun, two 7.92mm machineguns. *Thickest Armor:* 60mm.

## Strategy and Tactics

The most important strategic principle is that you must have a plan; know, in general terms, what you want to accomplish and how you intend to do it. Your enemy's actions will probably force you to modify your plan, but you need some focus for your actions from the beginning. Don't try to do everything at once; you don't have enough troops for that. One or (at most) two objectives at a time will allow you to concentrate your forces.

The best offense is a good defense. The best way to win a battle is to force the enemy to attack you on your terms: when

you have superior numbers and occupy good terrain in defend mode. There are two ways to accomplish this trick. The first is to create a strong position he can't bypass between him and his necessary objective; for example, if you put a strong force across the enemy supply line, he can't just ignore it. The second is to guess where he's going and be there first; let him run into your units where he doesn't expect them and before he's ready for combat.

Think twice before abandoning good defensive terrain. Conversely, if the enemy fails to garrison crucial terrain, try to seize it immediately. Fight to the last man in fortifications, and attack to regain them. Escarpments are good, but they can be bypassed and often face the wrong way. Hills are excellent for the defender—but remember that a unit gets no benefit if attacked from an adjacent hill. A minefield will cause lots of enemy casualties if he's forced to attack it, even if you only put a weak unit there; but an empty minefield is easy to push through, and once it's gone, it's gone forever.

Avoid frontal attacks on strong positions whenever possible. Flank them and put them out of supply or threaten to surround them. Try to maneuver the enemy out of a strong position and force him to defend a weak position. If attack can't be avoided (if you want to take Tobruk, for instance), use lots of infantry and artillery. Even better is to catch the enemy while he's moving, preferably in the flank. Flank attacks are hard to achieve but very rewarding. The easiest way is to set an ambush: put reserves on the flanks of your positions and counterattack the enemy when he attacks.

Attack HQs whenever you can; you may cripple the enemy for several turns. Even threatening his HQ will keep him busy rescuing it.

When you concentrate your army in small areas (which you must if you want to accomplish anything), cover crucial intersections on the wide flanks with small units. Send recon and armored car units out to scout the enemy; they take fewer casualties than other units if they bump in-

to anything.

Don't keep your units fighting until casualties, fatigue, and morale loss make them ineffective. Withdraw them while they're still in fair shape and regroup. Try to keep a reserve of fresh troops ready to continue the attack or defense. (Reserves are a good idea for many purposes.)

Each type of unit has its own function. Using them properly is the essence of combined arms tactics. Assaults call for infantry and lots of artillery. Attack German flak with infantry, never with tanks. (Germans: on defense stack your flak with tanks.) If an infantry unit has no antitank guns or artillery, any armored unit, even an L3 or armored car, can attack it with impunity; and these weak armored units shouldn't attack anything else. To prevent such attacks, stack your poorly-equipped infantry with minefields, tanks, or well-equipped infantry. Attack tanks with tanks, preferably better tanks in overwhelming numbers; keep your tanks concentrated, maximum stacks if possible. (Of course there are never enough tanks for everything.)

The Italian army varies greatly in quality. Italian infantry isn't good for much; neither are L3's. But Bersaglieri are excellent troops (many of them very well equipped with antitank guns), and M13 units can be quite effective if you keep them concentrated.

## **BREVITY**

Since the Tobruk lines will usually be too strong for either side to achieve very much there, the majority of the action in Brevity is around Halfaya Pass (0725) and Bardia (1224). Strategic options are limited by the small numbers of units and turns. There really is only one option: the Allied player must attack along a 3-4 hex wide coastal path while the Axis player throws his units in the way. Flanking maneuvers are too time consuming. Also note that the shortness of the scenario renders supply virtually irrelevant, since most units have enough internal supply to last the entire game.

## BATTLEAXE

**Allied Player:** The first important item to notice is that the burden of attack is on you while the clear numerical superiority lies with the Axis. The only recompense you have is that the Axis forces are scattered and disorganized at the beginning of the scenario. By immediately advancing, you have opportunities to win. In this scenario, Tobruk is better defended than in Brevity but the Axis has a sizeable quantity of panzers to work with, and if left alone the Axis player can break through to Tobruk. Even the 8-turn duration of the scenario is adequate time.

You have three choices available to your relieving forces: advance to take Halfaya Pass and Bardia, try to destroy the Axis forces around Bardia in toto, or make a flanking attack to relieve Tobruk by way of Sidi Omar (0521) and Sidi Rezegh (1213). The basic task is to create problems for the Axis player so that he has no forces to spare for an assault on Tobruk. The best choice is the first one; the other two are probably beyond your means, although feints in those directions can be useful.

**Axis Player:** You have much more interesting decisions to make. At the beginning of the scenario the three Axis corps are spread out all over the map. Organizing them for battle takes two or three turns. You need to form a plan early to avoid wasting time and effort. It is easiest to think of the Axis forces as two Italian infantry corps and two German panzer divisions. Though the forces are intermixed at the start, roughly one Italian infantry corps and one German panzer division are encircling Tobruk, while a separate, similar force is holding off the Allied relief force. If you join the panzers into a single striking entity, it can devastate either Tobruk or the relieving Allied units. However, there is not enough time to do both. In addition, by stripping the German units from one Italian corps, you leave that front vulnerable. Both the Allied relief columns and the Tobruk garrison are capable of pummeling a single Italian infantry corps. You must decide

whether to keep your force evenly divided (a conservative choice) or concentrate against one of the Allied groups: "Take a chance and win a prize!" Supply can be a problem for you in this scenario, especially fuel. Try not to move the Axis HQs very much since each hex moved costs 10 points of fuel.

## CRUSADER

This scenario offers the most alternatives for both sides. Where to attack/defend, when, and with what are all quite undecided by the starting position.

**Allied player:** You have some very nice infantry as well as armor units and a handful of armored cars for scouting. Given the central position you start with, there are four targets upon which this power can be brought to bear: Acroma (cut off all the German forces from supply and relieve Tobruk), Tobruk (relieve the city and cut off all Germans east of it), Bardia (chop up the weak frontier units and then push up the coastal road to Tobruk), or the Axis armor units themselves (once the Axis armor is gone, the remaining Axis forces can be methodically crushed). Whatever the decision, remember that there is no hurry. As opposed to Brevity and Battleaxe, where time is of the essence, Crusader offers 18 turns to get the job done and there is ample supply for the full length of the scenario. In particular, the infantry must trudge up from the rear and the entire mass of armor and infantry joined in attack. Running forward with the armor and having it stalled on German antitank guns and counterattacked by Panzers needlessly endangers the entire operation. There is more than just sand and rock in this desert; beware the German 88's and Rommel's Panzers!

**Axis Player:** You need to decide the basic nature of your troops' actions: defend, attack, or counterattack. There are many good reasons for each. Defend and the Allied player has to prove his skill by attacking your solid line, which can make the most of terrain and use the German infantry's excellent antitank guns (not to men-

tion flak) against advancing Allied tanks. As you will discover if you pick this option, the main problem is to decide where the Allied attack is going to be, so that you can build a defensive line against it.

Attack (Rommel's choice) and at least half the momentum of the battle is yours. Regrettably, the desert is large and running around in the enemy's rear areas does not guarantee your ability to find and destroy his HQs and/or other weak units. Also, like Rommel, you may soon find your units out of supply and without a secure rear area to regroup.

Counterattack hedges your bets, keeping open both the option of positional defense and the chance to hit the enemy spearheads from the flank. In essence, you are keeping most of your army in reserve. This option requires you to be ready to move quickly and decisively when the time comes.

**Both Players:** This scenario is the most wide open of the four, and armies can find themselves fighting almost anywhere on the map. For this reason, it most rewards the player who best scouts out the enemy position while concealing his own. Knowing how your opponent has disposed his units enables you to accomplish your goals much more readily: to attack weak, exposed units, build a strong defensive line, launch a flank assault with your armor, prepare a strong counterattack, or cut off your opponent's supply lines.

## GAZALA

**Axis Player:** Like Battleaxe, the Gazala scenario starts with the numerically inferior side (here it's you) having a strong positional advantage that must be immediately exploited because it is only temporary.

You start the scenario with the benefit of Rommel's night march of the entire DAK to the southern flank of the Allied line. The German and Italian armor is fully concentrated and must be immediately put to use on the ill-prepared Allied left flank. Over the course of the battle, you need to decide how close behind the Allied line your path of attack will be: toward El Adem (1311)

or toward Acroma (1607). As is always the case in situations of opportunistic exploitation, there is never enough armor to do all the good things that you want to do. Pushing the forward units further offers both great opportunities and great risks; using the lagging infantry for mopping up bypassed enemy units is usually superior to hurrying them forward to support the tanks. When playing Gazala, you will experience what Rommel did: continual tension and decision-making with very few factors known for certain. The original mandatory push forward cannot be maintained forever and the first major decision for you will be when to halt the tanks for regrouping. If you plan for this regrouping, it is likely to be more beneficial. Remember, the final goal is Tobruk and cutting the coastal road is crucial. You may also experience supply line problems as you swing closer to Tobruk. Taking Bir Hachiem gains you some distance, but eventually you will have to open a route through the Allied minefields, for example around hex 1305.

**Allied Player:** In Gazala, you have the strongest forces of either side in any scenario. However, your units are poorly positioned to meet Rommel's massive assault from the south. Like the Axis in Crusader, you can defend, attack, or counterattack. For defense, you have some excellent units: the strong infantry brigades with 48 antitank guns each, for example. By putting those units side by side, you can form a line virtually anywhere. Just sitting the fine Allied armor down in a hex can make that hex very difficult for the Axis. This style of play can be quite effective but it requires you to guess correctly where the attack will come.

You have some immediate opportunities if you decide to attack. Two Italian infantry brigades start in the front line next to Rotonda Mteifel (1304 and 1403) and neither of them has any antitank guns. In general, the center of the Axis position is weakly defended and quite vulnerable. If the Axis shifts more troops south to assist in the massive effort on the Allied left

flank, the Axis HQs and supply lines often become quite exposed. But don't get carried away in your offensive and ignore the Axis attacks completely, or you may find him in Tobruk before you know it.

Historically, the British high command opted for counterattack. While this is not in and of itself a bad idea, the British implementation was hopelessly confused. Avoid their mistake of attacking piecemeal by keeping your armor together and using

it simultaneously on the forward Axis units (usually the Panzers). Overwhelming odds are the order of the day. Once the Panzers have been stopped the counterattack can continue by either charging around the Axis southern flank to restore the original Allied line and cut the Axis off from their HQs and/or supply, or by pushing through to Rotonda Mteifel and nipping the Axis supply lines at their source.